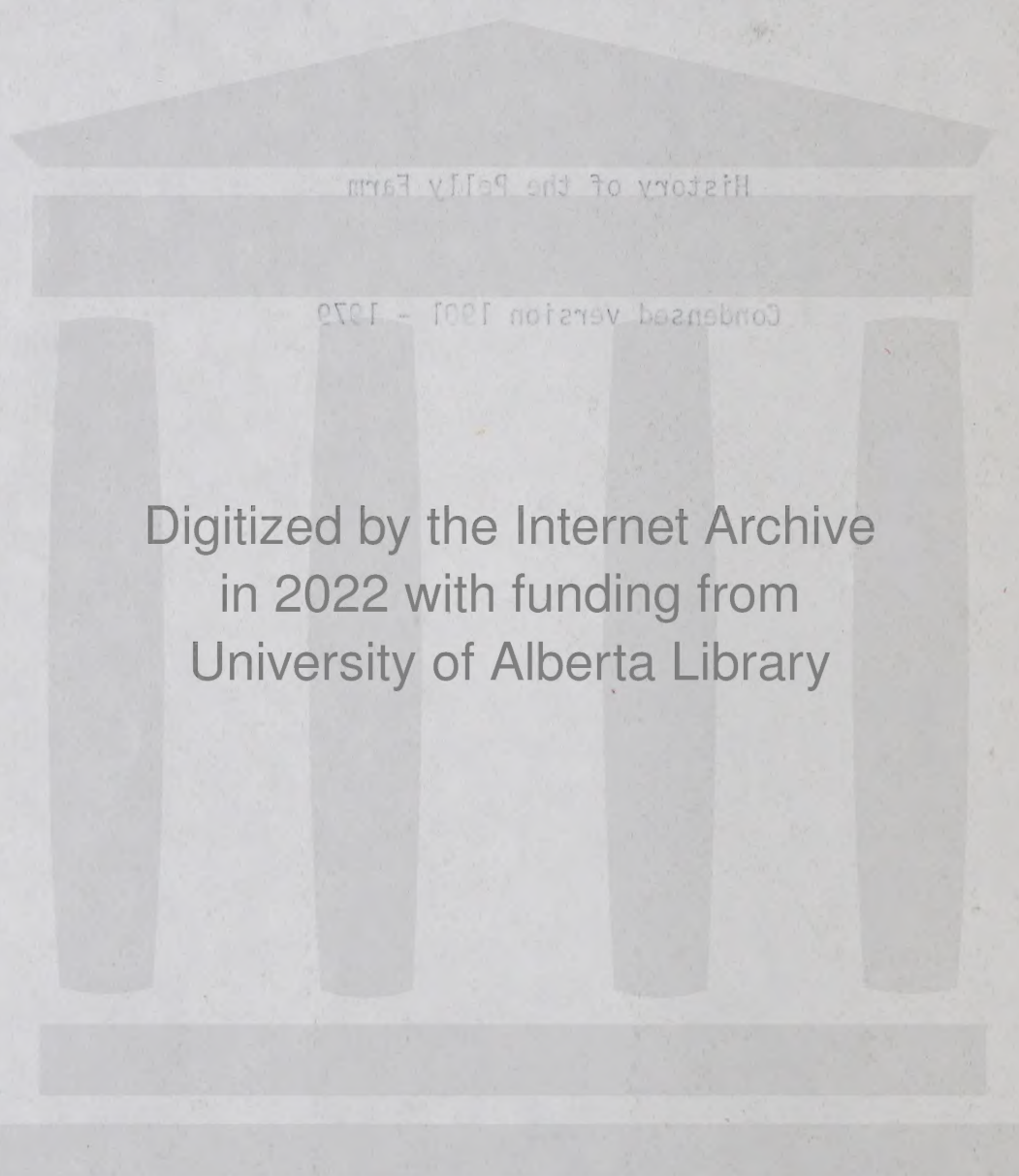


History of the Pelly Farm

Condensed version 1901 - 1979

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Condensed version 1901 - 1979

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History of the Pelly Farm

Condensed version 1901 - 1979

To clarify between the names Pelly Farm and Pelly River Ranch: apparently from 1901 until 1954 it was known as the Pelly Farm and in fact many people still refer to it as such - especially the locals and old-timers. Being unaware of this fact when the Bradleys came in 1954 they called it Pelly River Ranch.

One Edward Menard, a logger, made the first purchase transaction for a parcel of 20 acres for farming purposes on July 22nd, 1901. The initial price was \$5 an acre. It seems that during the transaction the government became aware of the fact that this parcel of land was near the new government road, which is known today as the old Dawson Trail and runs behind our cow pasture. It seems as if the government thought Edward Menard ^{should pay \$10.00 an acre.} had a partner by the name of Mr. George Grenier who apparently was both a farmer and family man. These two men, I believe, owned the farm from 1901 until 1915 although I have found some records which indicate that Menard was employed as a telegraph operator in Fort Selkirk some time between 1910 and 1914. In August 1978, we had the pleasure of meeting the daughter and grandchildren of Percy Wright, who is the stepson of the Grenier. I plan to visit the Wrights in Scarborough Maine to interview and tape the history of the era first - hand. If it were not for them, the beginnings of the farm would be little more than supposition, gleaned from official government records. How much reality, heart-ache, success and failure, to say nothing of scenes of everyday life, can one find in a piece of paper? I can honestly say that, without Percy's co-operation, these pages would be indeed lost to history.

On the lower end of our flat there is an old cabin still standing which we believe to be the original, built in 1901. The cabin sits in an alcove of big cottonwood and spruce; the sod roof is covered with a marvellous array of wild flowers and a few willow saplings. Whenever the sun is out, the cabin is built in such a fashion that one part of the roof is always in shadow and the other part is always in sun. It's a building which radiates of peace and old times. People speak of it as "giving off good vibrations". We have done some maintenance over the years but it is due for

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yet another new pole and sod roof again.

In 1915, Frank Chapman and Pete Olsen bought the farm. They did most of the clearing and breaking of the land and setting it up as a farm. They wintered horses and raised shorthorn cattle. Also, they brought in a hand fed thrashing machine, a steam engine and various horse drawn equipment; also a roller mill. It's very obvious that they grew hay to feed the livestock. They were successful with grain too, and ground their wheat into flour which was sold for human beings as well as for dog feed.

When the farm first started, it was mainly used as a rest and rehabilitation center for stagecoach horses and geological survey horses. In fact, all us owners have boarded horses - even after the government went out of the horse business. Today, helicopters are the phantom horses of the past, and they serve forestry and mining outfits from our chopper pad.

The Bradley brothers have worked the farm with horses and horse-drawn equipment brought in by previous owners for a good number of years. Things they used were a binder, a hay mower, a hay rake and a breaking plow. In 1960, a 1942 Ford tractor was brought up, which we still use. We got our forage harvester which is second hand - of unknown age in 1966. The 624 Ford tractor was brought up, from Fort St. John in 1971. We thrash with a machine whose vintage is somewhere around 1928 brought up by J.C. Wilkenson. Most of its repairs have been mere improvisations over the years.

It is known that Pete Olsen is buried in the Military Cemetery at Fort Selkirk. Story has it that Olsen's heirs sent in an outside lawyer to settle his estate and, in doing so, Chapman was financially broken and he was forced to return to the States.

George and May Fairclough bought the Pelly Farm in 1927. Unfortunatley George passed away recently. George freighted on the river and was in the wood business: he also wintered government horses. He sawed lumber off our land and built the house and cabin we are now in, as well as ~~some other~~ buildings we still use. The house is big: 5 bedrooms, a living room, dining room, kitchen, bathroom, and utility room, as well as a second utility room we built in 1973. It is very sturdily built, of 6X6 squared timbers,

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and well-loved as our home.

In 1940, the Faircloughs sold out to J.C. Wilkenson and family. It is very interesting to note that each of the owners before us thought he had three homesteads of 160 acres each, plus a 400-acre land grant that Chapman and Olsen got for some work done for the government. When we bought in 1954, we wanted to see a clear title; we found that only one homestead was proved up and there was no record of the 400 - acre land grant. The story was that all the transactions had been written on Transfer of Mining Claim forms and these had either been destroyed in Dawson or lost when the capital was shifted to Whitehorse in 1953. J.C. Wilkenson had to get a special "Order in Council" from Ottawa to buy the land that was actually being used as the farm in 1954 - some 337 acres. This encompasses only our fields. Land that has been used for grazing horses and cattle for the past 78 years is still not part of the farm.

Wilkenson brought in some machinery, mainly haying equipment, and he harvested quite a bit of grain. At one time he had pigs as well as cows. In addition, the whole family were trappers - and very good trappers. Many of you know the names of Jared, Eddie and Ethel Wilkenson. It is well known how capable the Wilkensons were in the great outdoors and much of their livelihood came from trapping. Not very romantic or glamorous - just damn cold, hard work.

How did the Bradleys ever get involved with the Pelly River Ranch? Hugh was a student at the University of Alberta, working on his Bachelor of Science degree in field crops. Dick had completed his courses at the Olds Agricultural College -- no dummies these guys! During the summer of 52/53, Hugh was employed at the experimental farm near Haines Junction (mile 1019 Alaska Highway). In the course of his employment, he came to the Pelly Farm to check out the experimental plots and got to know the J.C. Wilkenson family. Apparently, after a time Mr. Wilkenson decided to sell out and he approached Hugh, who in turn approached two friends and of course his brother Dick. Dick arrived first, On April 17th 1954; since Hugh was finishing up his degree, he arrived June 4th 1954. One of the partners soon went on to what he felt was bigger and better things, while the other partner is still a silent member over 25 years later.

When the Bradleys set up the farm, they had \$2.53 between them and no known income. They started out with one sow and a boar and raised pigs and sold milk to pay for their groceries for about 5 years until they got their herd of cows built up.

Hugh has been keeping daily weather records of our immediate area for 25 years. Usually on wash days I ask him what is in store weatherwise: his only answer is that "Yup, we're bound to have some".

What do we do down on the farm? Primarily, we are occupied in the endeavor to raise cattle. We have raised only the Hereford breed: we like to winter very few more than 50 because of the feed situation, but in the spring of course we have 20 - odd calves. In the fall we generally butcher anywhere from 15 on up of young stock; usually they have been born in, say, the spring of 1979 and will be butchered in the fall of 1980. This meat we do sell locally, mostly in Pelly Crossing, Stewart Crossing, Mayo and Whitehorse. Other produce we sell are, of course, eggs and potatoes; many of the locals come in and are quite willing to take what we call "bin - run" at a reduced price.

We raise about 200 chickens and every second spring we go into Whitehorse and meet a plane which has our day-old chicks on board; these chicks have not had anything to eat or drink, so it's just a sort-of fly-in, pick up the chicks and fly home trip. Of course, with our old truck, it isn't actually a "flying" trip - one way is generally a ten hour haul.

I'm into raising rabbits. These are raised primarily for their meat, much as I hate to admit that. I have tanned prime hides with an alum recipe and have sold them locally for trim.

My first impression of the farm was very, very, negative. No red painted barns, no silos, and a house with no paint, to say nothing of the fact that there were no curtains! There were and are a couple of junkyards but only in my ignorance did I label them as such. I am aware now that the Pelly River Ranch could not function without these "junkyards"; they hold mass treasures of steel, wire, wood, old machinery and so on from which each and every repair can be improvised. Because of the time and expense, we seldom buy new repairs unless absolutely necessary.

This year to date, I have canned 505 jars of various food products - firstly salmon we have taken out of the river; secondly, probably, produce out of the garden such as beets, beans, peas, carrots, and rhubarb. I was lucky enough the last two years to get fruit in case lots to can. Also, we pick things like raspberries, black currants and cranberries and make jams, jellies and preserves.

As a centennial project in 1967, the men built a 32 - mile bush road from Pelly Crossing on our side of the river. Prior to this, they drove in 26 miles from Minto and then freighted every thing across the Pelly. No mean trick when you don't have a motor. To this day, we only buy groceries once a year, usually in November, and it's difficult enough even now.

The farm is situated six miles from the junction of the Yukon and Pelly Rivers. Almost everyone knows where Fort Selkirk is. Well, we're only a spit an' a holler up the Pelly valley! We have 337 titled acres, of which over 200 are under cultivation. Because of the number of livestock, we also have grazing leases.

The cows are put out on range in mid-May and come home in September when the pasture has frosted off. We leave salt blocks in various places for them and usually check on them quite regularly - especially during hunting season for ^{fear} that, in the excitement of seeing a large animal moving in the bush, one may forget that moose do not have white faces!

Many of the calves are born out on range, although we try, and wish the bull would co-operate, to have our cows calving in March and April before moving them out. We keep our milking stock at home with a couple of calves and other cows for company.

In winter, the milk cows and any late-born calves, plus the bull have a stanchion in the barn. The bull gets the most attention because we can not afford to have his accoutrements frost bitten! Some younger calves winter in the hen house, which serves a dual purpose in keeping both them and the chickens warm. The balance of our herd stay in corrals and have drive sheds of a sort in which they go when it's very cold. We are convinced that no breed but the Hereford can come through a Yukon winter in such good shape.

Rather than putting up hay, which the men did initially, we now put down silage. In a big pit, all the hay, broome grass, weeds, and anything that's green and grows is cut with a forage harvester and load upon load is put into this pit and tramped throughly. We must have at least 178 loads - each load representing about a ton - to see us through a winter. It has a marvellous aroma, much like a brewery, and is steamy - warm when it is fed in the winter. During the winter months, vitamin A is given every Sunday. Grain, primarily oats, is fed to the milk stock and other animals which show need of it. The livestock get oat bundles in-between loads of silage. The cattle are watered twice a day; the men cut a hole in the ice and this is kept open.

Our chickens forage mainly during the summer but still get a ration of oats that the men have ground, plus the troughs of surplus milk. Naturally, they are housed during the winter and their rations and oyster shells are increased.

My breeding rabbits are kept in the root cellar with our vegetables and the machinery the men are overhauling. In severe weather a barrel heater is kept going. I feed a few pellets but mostly ground oats and oat bundles - the rabbits love the straw.

I have two large gardens - Unless the cut worms get us, our gardens are always a big success. The cut worms are another matter. These entemics do the greatest damage just as the seeds are germinating. The unfortunate aspects of these creatures is that, after they are done with their damage, it is often too late to replant slow growing or long season plants and expect them to mature.

My summer garden contains peas, beans, beets, lettuce, onions, garlic, carrots, kola rabi, swiss chard, endives, herbs and sunflowers. In the winter one, there are parsnips, potatoes, cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, most mustard plants, extra beets and carrots. Also we have rhubarb, strawberries and raspberries. In the fields we grow mainly oats, the type being Rodney and Harman. In the past we have tried Victory, but this does not give as good a yield; Albeit does not give as good a quality of feed as Rodney. For wheat, we grow Park. The Garnet variety was quite successful but

Seed

but we cannot get the^{now} as it is an old variety and not popularly grown these days. In one field we grow antelope rye which is used as late fall and early spring pasture, or a cut of hay can be taken off, or it can be ripened for seed. This year our stand of rye was 6 - 7 feet high.

For many years experimental plots of wheat, oats and barley have been grown for the former experimental farm at 1019 on the Alaska Highway and now for Experimental Farm at Beaverlodge in Alberta.

As we say: we have never got rich, but we sure have a good life being poor.

Thank - you.

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[Bradley Family]

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